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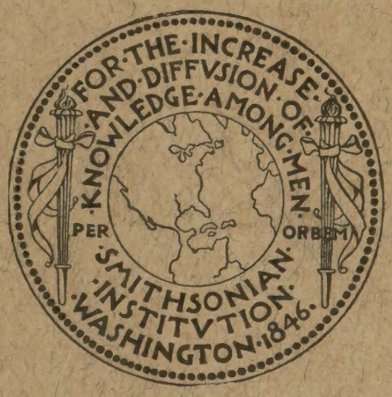
SMITHSONIAN MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS
VOLUME 80, NUMBER 9

ABORIGINAL WOODEN OBJECTS FROM SOUTHERN FLORIDA

(With Three Plates)

BY
J. WALTER FEWKES
Chief, Bureau of American Ethnology



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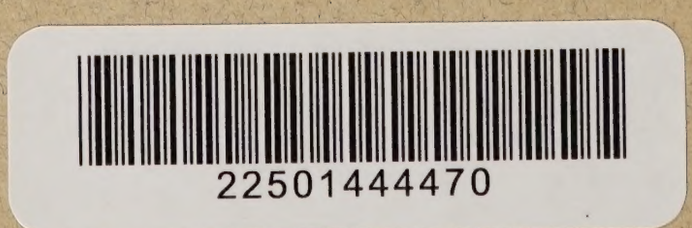

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ABORIGINAL WOODEN OBJECTS FROM SOUTHERN FLORIDA

By J. WALTER FEWKES

CHIEF, BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY

(With Three Plates)

In 1895 the late Mr. F. H. Cushing, for many years connected with the Bureau of American Ethnology, made some very remarkable discoveries of aboriginal remains at Key Marco, on one of the chain of islands that fringe the southwest coast of Florida, forming the coastal border of the Florida Everglades on the Gulf of Mexico. Cushing described and illustrated in a preliminary report on his work some of the most important objects found at that time.[1] Among the characteristic artifacts obtained by him were several wooden objects so radically different from any found elsewhere in Florida shell heaps that he regarded them as typical of an aboriginal culture theretofore unrecorded. He thereby opened up a new chapter of archeological research in Florida.

The author has desired for several years to obtain more specimens of this work in wood and although he has not been successful in his search for them in the field, a few have come to light in other ways. Through the kindness of Dr. Walter Hough, Head Curator of Anthropology of the U. S. National Museum, he is able to present figures of two "altar slabs" and a wooden "idol" found near Fort Myer and Lake Okeechobee. There is good reason to believe that as exploration in southern Florida progresses other wooden images will be brought to light.

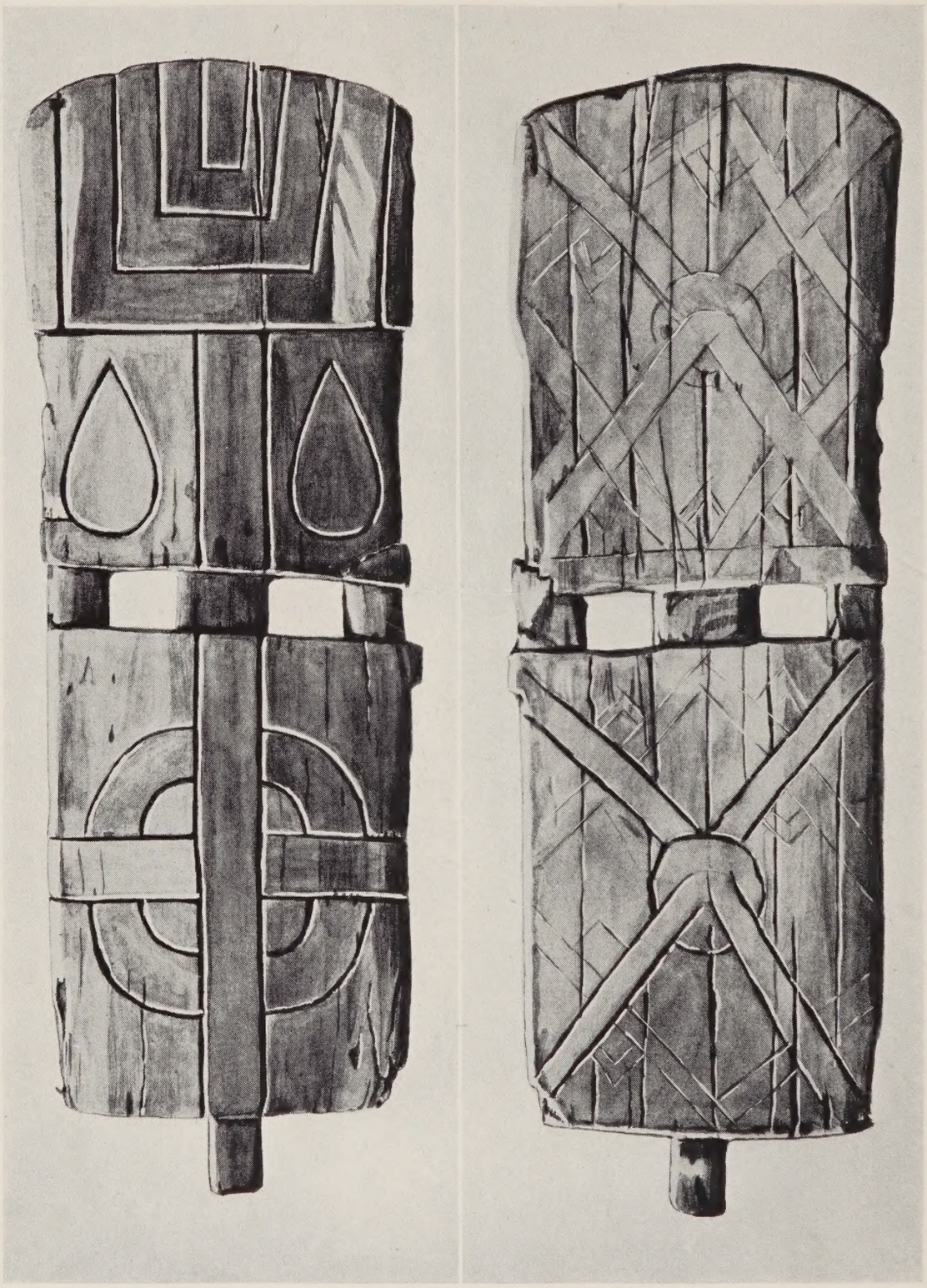
The idol (pl. 1, Cat. No. 316254, U. S. N. M.) is cut out of lignum vitae. It is said to have been plowed up on the north shore of Lake Okeechobee and was shipped to the U. S. National Museum by Mr. M. A. Miller, artesian and deep-well constructor of that vicinity. The De Soto County News of March 25, 1921, published an account of it by Mr. Miller in which he states that "where Mr. Miller plowed up the idol, Lake Okeechobee waters formerly stood six feet deep. The

[1] Proc. Amer. Phil. Soc., Vol. XXXV, No. 133.

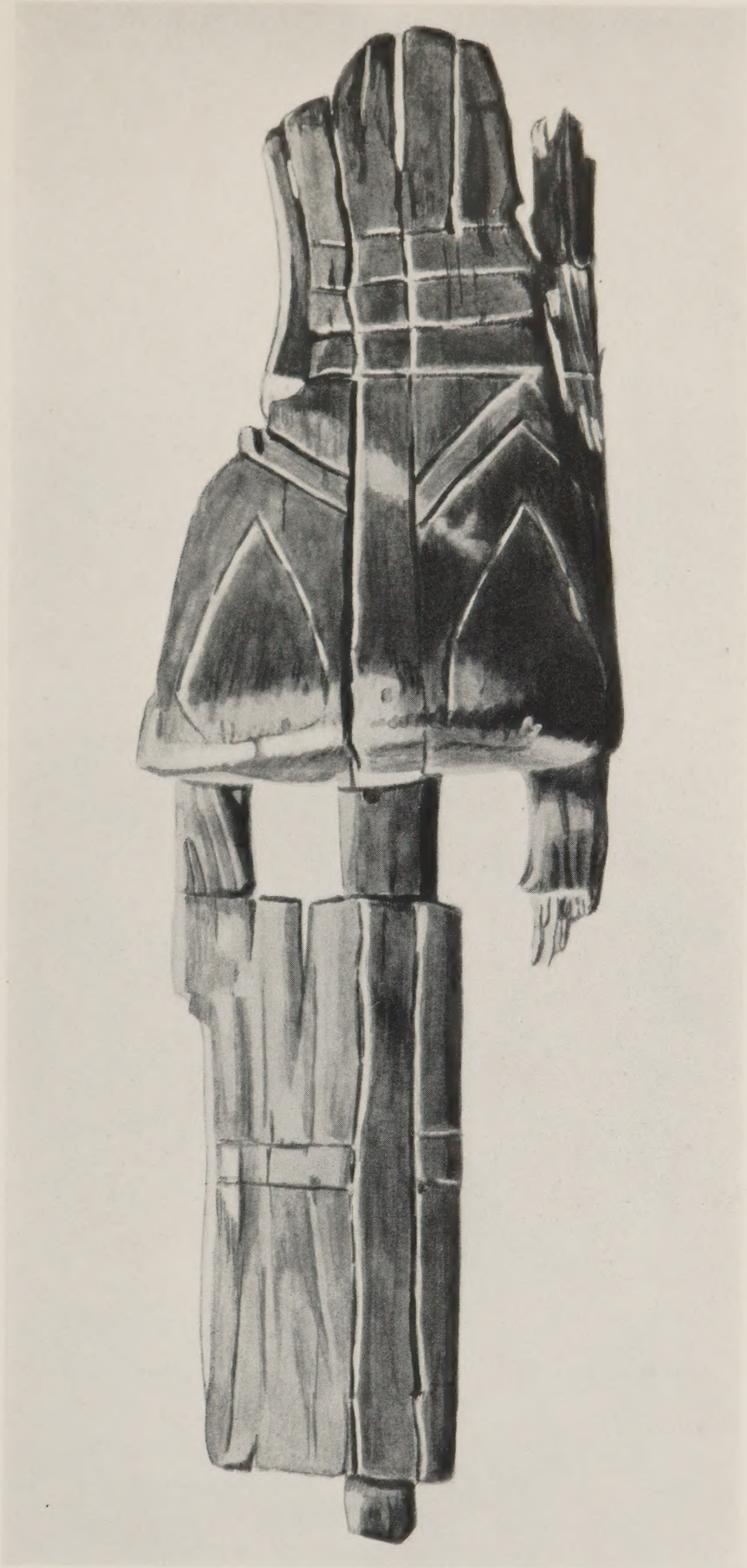
land is muck that has been reclaimed by drainage." The account continues: "Additional strength is lent to the theory that some race antedating the Indians lived along the shores of the lake by the finding of fragments of pottery in the same vicinity as that in which the idol was plowed up. It is also stated that there is a large shell mound in the vicinity of Lakeport which is believed to have been thrown up by the vanished race." The form and technique of this idol would seem to leave little doubt of its having been made by Indians, although a similar wooden idol found in Cuba is regarded by some ethnologists as African. The latter, now in the Museum of the Havana University at the Verdado, has been figured by Dr. Montone and also by M. R. Harrington of the Museum of the American Indian. The two specimens differ in form and in the position of the legs, that from Cuba resembling a sitting figure, with the legs bent at the knee, while in the Florida specimen the figure is squatting. The hair of the latter is cut in such a way as to remind one of the Muskhogean stone idols. Both seem to have been made of the same kind of wood and they are weathered to the same color.

Cushing associated certain wooden slabs that he discovered in the muck at Key Marco with altars and suggested that they were used in worship. The two specimens here illustrated (pls. 2 and 3) are made of soft wood (cypress or pine). They were presented to the U. S. National Museum by Mr. George Kinzie. One of them (pl. 2) is incised on the surface with a circle and cross, as if to represent the sun and a cosmic direction symbol. The form of the other (pl. 3) is different from that of any known wooden object from the region, but it is likewise decorated with an incised cross and straight and curved lines.

Front and side views of Wooden Idol, North Shore Lake Okeechobee, Florida.
Cat. No. 316,254, U. S. National Museum.



Front and back of Wooden Ceremonial Slab from Florida. Cat. No. 329,599, U. S. National Museum.



Wooden Ceremonial Slab from Florida. Cat. No. 329,598,
U. S. National Museum.